DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 427 SO 033 955

TITLE	Lincoln's Spot Resolutions. Teaching with Documents.
INSTITUTION	National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-06-18
NOTE	19p.; Designed and developed by the Education Staff of the National Archives and Records Administration. Photographic images of primary sources may not reproduce adequately. For additional "Teaching with Documents" materials, see SO 033 954-958.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Archives and Records Administration, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001. Tel: 866-272-6272 (Toll Free); Fax: 301-837-0483; e-mail: orderstatus@nara.gov. For full text: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/teaching_with_documents.html.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Standards; *Federal Government; Foreign Countries; Intermediate Grades; National Standards; *Primary Sources; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Student Research; Teacher Developed Materials; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS	Document Analysis; *Lincoln (Abraham); Mexican War; Mexico; National Civics and Government Standards; National History Standards

ABSTRACT

Tension has existed between the legislative and the executive branches of the U.S. government over war powers since the United States Constitution simultaneously vested Congress with the power to declare war and the President with the power of Commander in Chief. When Texas declared its independence and claimed additional territory to the Rio Grande, Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States and refused to recognize either the Texas annexation or the Rio Grande border. When President Polk drafted a message asking Congress to declare war on Mexico in May 1846, he asserted that "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon America's soil." A freshman Whig congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, questioned whether the spot where blood had been shed was really U.S. soil. On December 22, 1847, he introduced the "Spot Resolutions," one of several congressional resolutions opposing the war. It was never acted upon. This lesson plan uses two pages of Lincoln's "Spot Resolutions," as well as photographs of James Polk, John L. Slidell, Zachary Taylor, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, Charles Sumner, and Abraham Lincoln as historical primary source documents. The lesson plan provides teaching activities, including history and civics and government standards correlation and document analysis activities. Contains the documents and a written document analysis worksheet. (BT)

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Lincoln's Spot Resolutions

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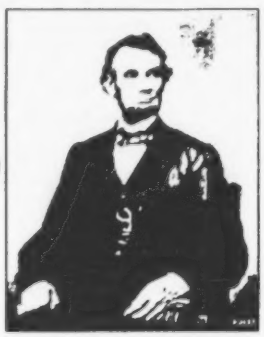
Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan:

Lincoln's Spot Resolutions

Background



Tension has existed between the legislative and the executive branches of the U.S. government over war powers since the Constitution simultaneously vested Congress with the power to declare war and the President with the power of Commander in Chief. Although Jefferson insisted on congressional approval before sending troops into combat, later Presidents have not felt bound by this precedent. Their alternate view was boosted by the Supreme Court in 1827 in the case *Martin v. Mott*. The Court ruled that it was constitutional for Congress to vest the president with the discretionary authority to decide whether an emergency had arisen and to raise a militia to meet such a threat of invasion or civil insurrection. Nonetheless, in the winter of 1845-46, as relations between the United States and Mexico deteriorated, there was no express delineation of powers between the two branches.

Prior to Texas's independence, the Neuces River was recognized as the northern boundary of Mexico. Spain had fixed the Neuces as a border in 1816, and the United States ratified it in the 1819 treaty by which the United States had purchased Florida and renounced claims to Texas.

Even following Mexico's independence from Spain, American and European cartographers fixed the Texas border at the Neuces. When Texas declared its independence, however, it claimed as its territory an additional 150 miles of land, to the Rio Grande. With the annexation of Texas in 1845, the United States adopted Texas's position and claimed the Rio Grande as the border.

Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States and refused to recognize either the Texas annexation or the Rio Grande border. President James Polk (photo citation: 111-B-4542) sent a special envoy, John L. Slidell (photo citation: 111-B-4134), to propose cancellation of Mexico's debt to United

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States citizens who had incurred damages during the Mexican Revolution, provided Mexico would formally recognize the Rio Grande boundary. Slidell was also authorized to offer the Mexican government up to $30 million for California and New Mexico.

Between Slidell's arrival on December 6, 1845, and his departure in March 1846, the regime of President Jose Herrara was overthrown and a fervently nationalistic government under General Mariano Paredes seized power. Neither leader would speak to Slidell. When Paredes publicly reaffirmed Mexico's claim to all of Texas, Slidell left in a temper, convinced that Mexico should be "chastised."

Zachary Taylor

The agent for chastisement was already in place. On January 13, 1846, more than 3,500 troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor (photo citation: 111-B-3489) moved south under President Polk's order, from Corpus Christi on the Neuces River to a location on the north bank of the Rio Grande. Advancing on March 8 to Point Isabel, the U.S. troops found that the settlement had been burned by fleeing Mexicans. By March 28, the troops were near the mouth of the Rio Grande across from the Mexican town of Matamoros.

Polk claimed the move was a defensive measure, and expansionists and Democratic newspapers in the United States applauded his action. Whig newspapers said that the movement was an invasion of Mexico rather than a defense of Texas. While newspapers in Mexico called for war, General Pedro de Ampudia warned, "If you insist in remaining upon the soil of the department of Tamaulipas, it will clearly result that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question."

General Ampudia's prediction came true on April 25 when Mexican cavalry crossed the Rio Grande and attacked a mounted American patrol, killing five, wounding eleven, and capturing forty-seven.

President Polk

In Washington, President Polk, although unaware of the developments, had drafted a message asking Congress to declare war on Mexico on the basis of Mexico's failure to pay U.S. damage claims and refusal to meet with Slidell. At a cabinet meeting on May 9, he notified his cabinet that he would ask for war in a few days. Only Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft counseled for delay, waiting for a Mexican attack.

On that evening, Polk received Taylor's account of the April 25 skirmish. Polk revised his war message, then sent it to Congress on May 11 asserting, "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and

shed American blood upon America's soil." On May 13, Congress declared war, with a vote of 40-2 in the Senate and 174-14 in the House.

Although Congress had declared war, it was not without reservation. An amendment was proposed, although defeated, to indicate that Congress did not approve of Polk's order to move troops into disputed territory. Sixty-seven Whig representatives voted against mobilization and appropriations for a war.

Ohio Senator Tom Corwin accused Polk of involving the United States in a war of aggression. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina abstained from voting, correctly foreseeing that the war would aggravate sectional strife. Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster (photo citation: 111-B-4205) voiced doubts about the constitutionality of Polk's actions, believing that Polk had failed to consult adequately with Congress. As the war deepened, "Conscience" Whigs denied Polk had tried to avoid war.

A freshman Whig Congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln (photo citation: 111-B-4246A), questioned whether the "spot" where blood had been shed was really U.S. soil. On December 22, 1847, he introduced the "Spot Resolutions," of which the second and third pages of Lincoln's handwritten copy are shown. One of several congressional resolutions opposing the war, it was never acted upon by the full Congress. Lincoln's action temporarily earned him a derisive nickname, "spotty Lincoln," coined by one Illinois newspaper.

Other citizens shared their legislators' concern, particularly those in the Northeast who saw the war as a ploy to extend slavery. The most celebrated was Henry David Thoreau, who refused to pay his $1 Massachusetts poll tax because he believed the war an immoral advancement of slavery.

Acerbic former President John Quincy Adams (photo citation: 111-B-3495) described the war as a southern expedition to find "bigger pens to cram with slaves." Regional writer James R. Lowell, author of the Biglow Papers, had his Yankee farmer Hosea Biglow scorn fighting to bring in new slave states. Charles Sumner (photo citation: 111-B-1148), a noted abolitionist, also condemned the war from pacifist principles. Philadelphian Joseph Sill's diary records widespread public disapproval for the war by October 1847. The Massachusetts state legislature resolved the war an unconstitutional action because it was initiated by order of the President with the "triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the slave power and of obtaining the control of the free states."

Concern that Taylor's order sending troops into the disputed territory provoked the clash was foremost in an October 1847 article in one Whig newspaper, *The American Review*: "The Constitution contemplates that before deliberate hostilities shall be undertaken in any case, a declaration of war shall be made; but in this case a hostile aggressive move was made under the personal orders of the President."

Ironically, when Lincoln became President, he extended the war powers of the executive, action he had criticized as a Congressman. Following the firing on Fort Sumter, he declared a naval blockade on his own authority. The capture and condemnation of four runners led to a case that went to the Supreme Court. In 1863 the Court affirmed Lincoln's actions in the Prize Cases, 2 Black 635.

The "Spot Resolutions" are kept in the Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, RG 233, HR 30 A-B 3.

The Documents

Document 1: "The Spot Resolutions"

Lesson Resources

Standards Correlations

Teaching Activities

Document Analysis Worksheet

Page URL: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/lincoln_spot_resolutions/lincoln_spot_resolutions.html

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Teaching Activities

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 4-Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)
  - Standard 1C-Demonstrate understanding of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the nation's expansion to the Northwest, and the Mexican-American War.

This lesson correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

- Standard IV.A.1.-Explain how nation-states interact with each other.
- Standard IV.B.2.-Evaluate, take, and defend positions about how United States foreign policy is made and the means by which it is carried out.

Cross-curricular Connections
Share this exercise with your history, government, and language arts colleagues.

Interpreting the Document

1. Students should review information in their textbooks about the U.S. entry into the Mexican War and opposition to that war. Supplement the text with information from the note to the teacher.

2. Ask students to locate on a map or in an atlas the following geographical features: the Neuces River, the Rio Grande, Corpus Christi, Point Isabel, Matamoros.

3 Ask students to read the document, either aloud as a class or silently. Then ask them to summarize each of the eight resolutions in their own words:

   a. Using the text and note to the teacher, ask students to answer each of Lincoln's points.
   b. Using Polk's war message, ask students to answer each of the

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points.

c. Ask students to compile a list of secondary sources where they might find information to resolve the discrepancies between the two versions of the events.
d. Ask students to compile a list of primary sources that they could examine to resolve the discrepancies between the two versions.

Public Opinion

1. Most students are aware that television influences public opinion from politics to fashion, but they are less sensitive to the impact of other forms of communication. As a class, discuss the following questions:
   a. Apart from television, how do they get information about current events?
   b. Apart from television, what sources do they turn to for information upon which to base an opinion? (For example, consumer, book, movie, record, or fashion reviews and editorials)
   c. Can they tell what side of an issue their local newspaper favors? Opposes? How?
   d. Apart from articles on the editorial page, what other decisions made by newspaper editors influence public opinion and knowledge?
   e. What impact would political party newspapers have had in the 1840s, an era before television or radio?

2. Antiwar protesters did not just appear with the Vietnam War, as some students believe. Time permitting, you may wish to assign students to read Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" or the play based on his incarceration, The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail, or James R. Lomell's Biglow Papers, or other examples of opposition to the Mexican War. Students should report to the class the issues raised and tactics used by these earlier protesters.

3. Direct students to look into earlier and later antiwar material, from Aristophanes' Lysistrata to Holly Near's songs about the conflict in Central America. Ask students to conduct research and prepare written or oral reports or to write an editorial on one of the following topics:

   f. Protesters of conscience against wars other than the Mexican War.
   g. Moral issues raised by conscientious objectors at different periods in history.
   h. Tactics used by antiwar protesters over time and how these tactics have changed.

The photographs included in this project are available through the National Archives Information Locator (NAIL) database and are in Record Group 111, Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer. NAIL is a searchable database that contains information about a wide variety of NARA holdings across the country. You can use NAIL to search record descriptions by keywords or topics and retrieve digital copies of selected textual documents, photographs, maps, and sound recordings related to thousands of topics.

Page URL: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/lincoln_spot_resolutions/teaching_activities.html

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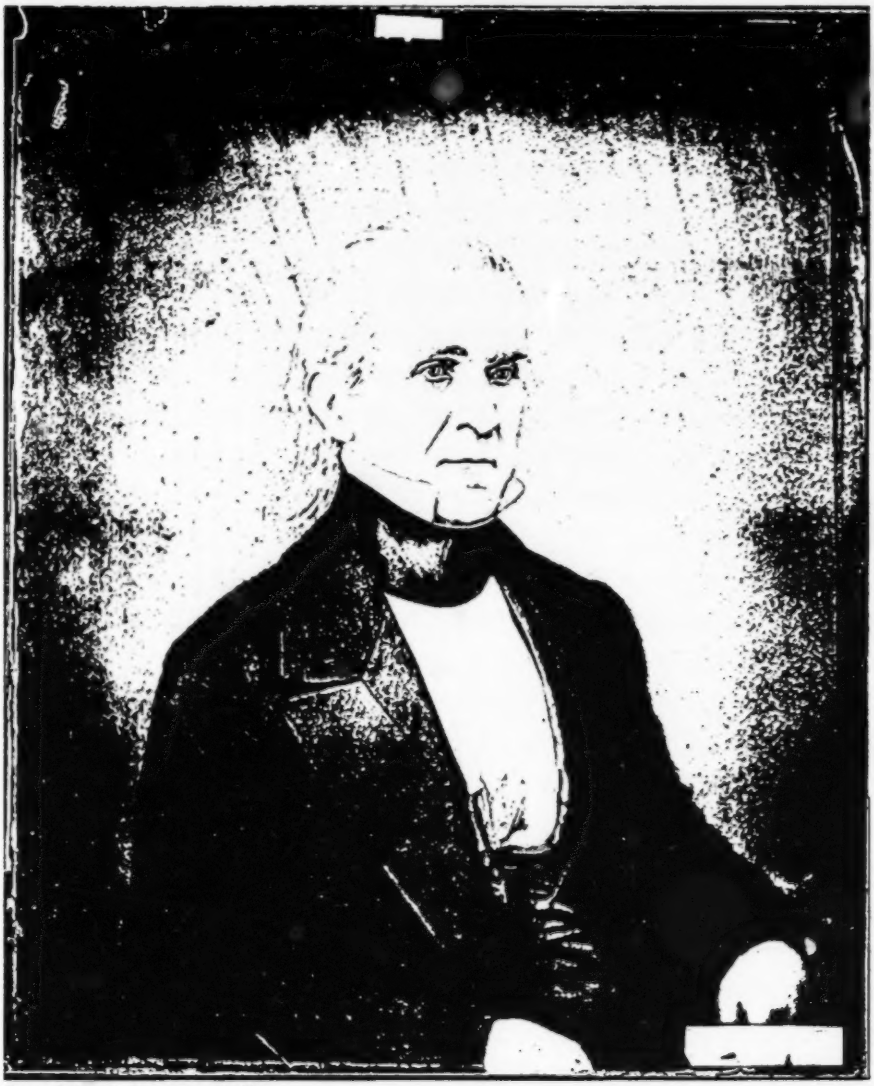

President James Polk

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John L. Slidell

General Zachary Taylor

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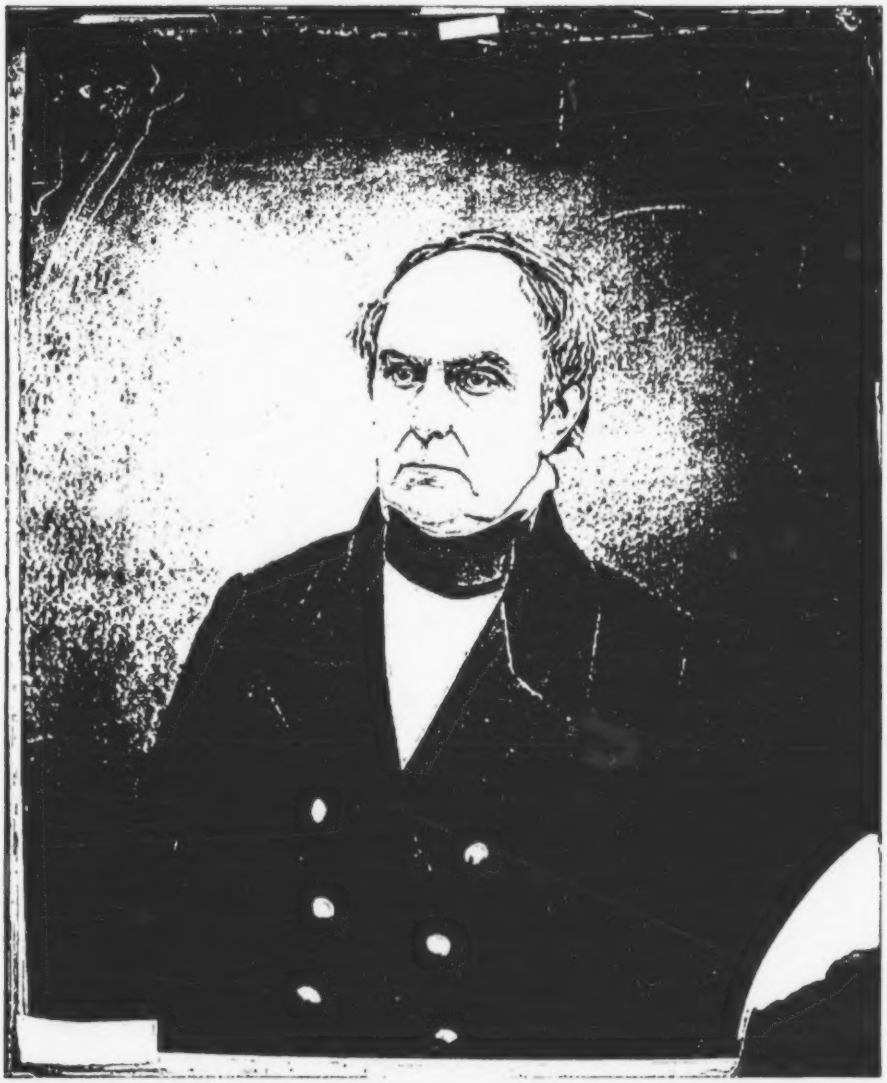
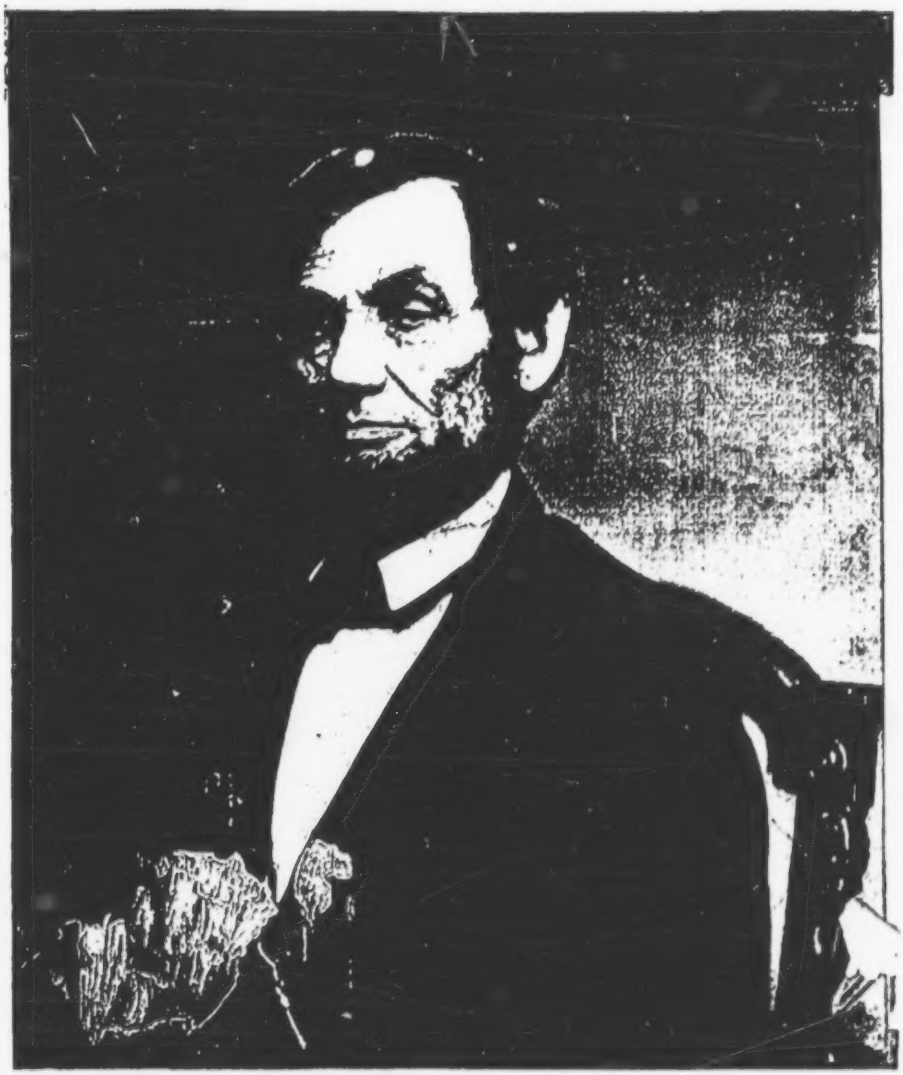


Senator Daniel Webster



Abraham Lincoln

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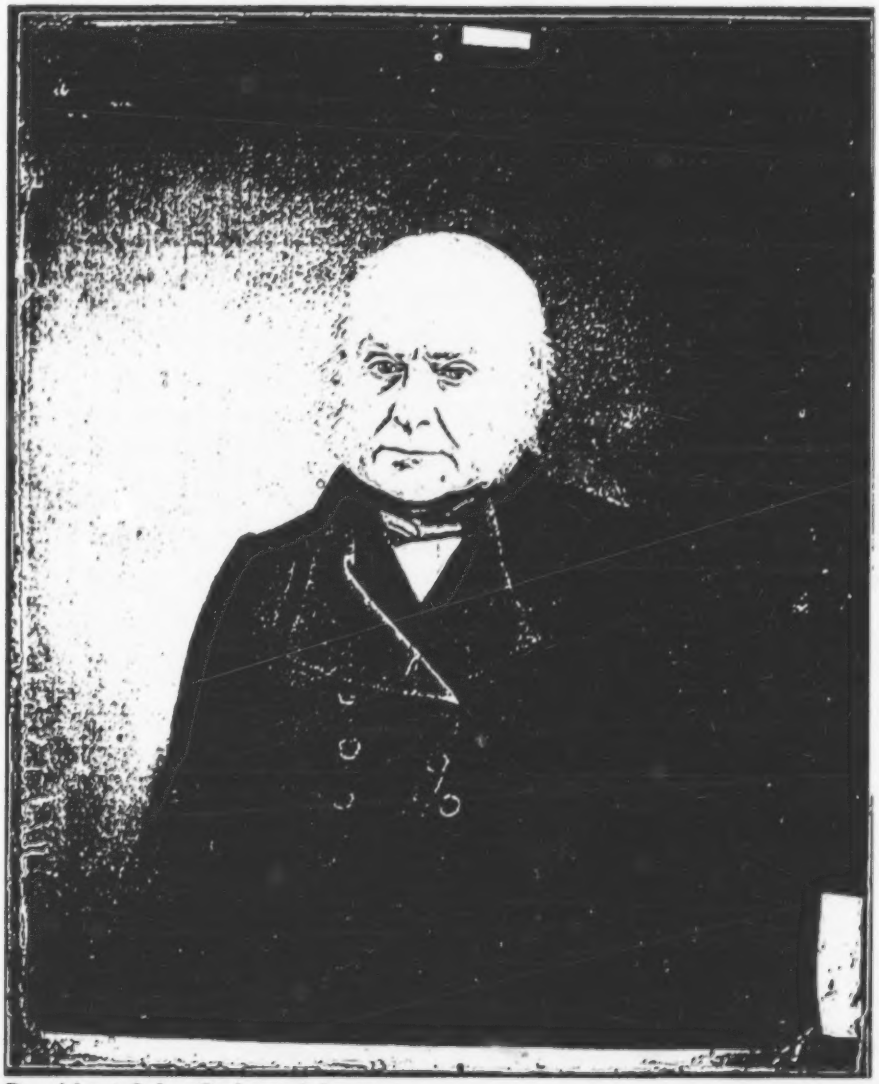

President John Quincy Adams

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Charles Sumner

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Resolved by the House of Representatives, that the President of the United States, be respectfully requested to inform this House

First: Whether the spot of soil on which the blood of our citizens was shed, as in his message described, was, or was not, within the limits of Spain, at least from the treaty of 1819 until the Mexican revolution

Second: Whether that spot is, or is not, within the territory which was wrested from Spain by the Mexican revolution.

Third: Whether that spot is, or is not, within a settlement of people, which settlement had existed ever since long before the Texas revolution, until its inhabitants fled from the approach of the U. S. Army.

Fourth: Whether that settlement is, or is not, isolated from any and all other settlement, by the Gulf of Mexico, and the Rio Grande, on the South and West, and by wide uninhabited regions on the North and East.

Fifth: Whether the People of that settlement, or a majority of them, or any of them, had ever, previous to the bloodshed, mentioned in his messages, submitted themselves to the government or laws of Texas, or of the United States, by consent, or by compulsion, either by accepting offices, or voting at elections, or paying taxes, or serving on juries, or having process served upon them, or in any other way.

Sixth: Whether the People of that settlement, did, or did not, leaving unprotected their homes and their growing crops, flee from the approach of the United States Army, because

Document 1: The Spot Resolutions, page 1

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the blood was shed, as in his message states; and whether the first Blood so shed, was or was not shed within the inclosures of the People, or some of them, who chose them from it—

Seventh: Whether the Citizens, whose Blood was shed, as in his message declared, were or were not, at that time, armed officers, and soldiers, sent into that settlement, by the Military order of the President through the Secretary of War— and

Eighth: Whether the Military force of the United States, including those Citizens, was or was not, so sent into that settlement, after Gen. Clayton had communicated to this War Department that, in his opinion, no such movement was necessary to the defence or protection of Texas—

Document 1: The Spot Resolutions, Page 2

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Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):

___ Newspaper	___ Map	___ Advertisement
___ Letter	___ Telegram	___ Congressional record
___ Patent	___ Press release	___ Census report
___ Memorandum	___ Report	___ Other

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):

___ Interesting letterhead	___ Notations
___ Handwritten	___ "RECEIVED" stamp
___ Typed	___ Other
___ Seals	

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:

_____

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

_____

POSITION (TITLE):

_____

5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

_____

6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

_____
_____
_____

B. Why do you think this document was written?

_____
_____

C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

_____
_____

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

_____
_____

E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

_____
_____

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